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ABSTRACT

The mission of the Mid-continental Regional Education Laboratory (McREL) is to improve practice and increase academic performance in the schools of the seven-state mountain-plains region. McREL's principal approach to the dissemination and utilization of the effective schools research has been training teachers to use research. Based on the effective schools research, McREL has established an Effective Schools Program (ESP) that aims at providing participants with knowledge and skills to implement research-based practices, with the ultimate goal of increased school efficiency and increased student achievement. The training that educators receive through ESP emphasizes data collection about current practices, training, and coaching in the use of new practices, and feedback for monitoring and guiding progress. The program is designed to meet school or district improvement needs, to develop a pool of on-site training material, and to give participants the skills to train their colleagues and other staff members. School districts participating in ESP follow a five-part process: (1) orientation; (2) logistical planning; (3) assessment and training; (4) improvement planning; and (5) follow-up. Each step of the process is discussed as is the program's evaluation design. (JMK)

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A Regional Laboratory Works with Schools

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Mid-continent Regional Education Laboratory

The mission of the Mid-continental Regional Education Laboratory (McREL) is to improve practice and increase academic performance in the schools of the seven-state mountain-plains region. For the most part this is accomplished through the transfer and application of research-based knowledge to practice and policy settings. In particular, McREL has disseminated the "effective schools" research to schools and SEAs in the region. The coalescence of this research took place at about the same time that McREL was planning its service activities (i.e., 1978), so it quite naturally became the focus of those activities.

McREL's principal approach to the dissemination and utilization (d&u) of the effective schools research has been training. Other d&u modes have been used as well, e.g., *Noteworthy*, (an aperiodic monograph) and the State Policy Activity, but McREL's Effective Schools Program (ESP), which consists of presentations and training based on the effective schools research, represents the single most significant activity. This report is concerned with the description of the Effective Schools Program.

The Effective Schools Program: Goals, Structure, and Process

The effective schools research indicates building and classroom practices that promote student achievement, e.g., Good (1983). Because a school's resources, including time, are not unlimited, the research focuses in large part on increasing school efficiency. Based on this research, McREL's Effective Schools Program aims at providing participants with knowledge and skills to implement research-based practices, with the ultimate goals of: (1) increased school efficiency and (2) increased student achievement.

The enabling objectives of the Effective Schools Program are:

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- to increase participants' understanding of the effective schools research and its applications to their situation;
- to help participants examine and select strategies based on the research to improve the performance of administrators, teachers, and students;
- to facilitate participants' development of a long-term, multi-year, building-level effective schools plan.

The training educators receive through the Effective Schools Program emphasizes data collection about current practices, training and coaching in the use of new practices, and feedback for monitoring and guiding progress. The program is designed to meet school or district improvement needs, to develop a pool of on-site training material, and to give participants the skills to train their colleagues and other staff members. In short, it provides a complete and self-sustainable program of school improvement.

School districts participating in the Effective Schools Program follow a five-part process:

1. Orientation.

The program starts with an overview of the effective schools research base and an orientation to the Effective Schools Program. It involves one or more visits by a McREL staff member to present the research and the Effective Schools Program to the superintendent, school board, and selected principals, teachers and parents. The orientation provides participants with a practical understanding of how they can make their schools and classrooms more effective, and enables them to make an informed decision about whether to commit to the Effective Schools Program.

2. Logistical Planning

Following the orientation, the planning for the Effective Schools Program takes place. The program offers units as depicted in Figure 1; schools will generally choose some, but not all, as the content for the training sessions. During this stage of the ESP, the desired assessment, training, and development activities are determined. A member of McREL's staff meets with a district or school leadership team to set objectives, plan activities and schedules, and identify participants. Costs are projected and a contract or letter of agreement is signed.

Figure 1
Units of the Effective Schools Program

File I. Instruction
- A. Time
- B. Classroom management
- C. Discipline
- D. Motivation
- E. Expectations
- F. Instruction
- G. Beginning the school year

File II School Management
- A. Effective schools
- B. Leadership

File III. Testing and Curriculum
- A. Testing
- B. Curriculum

File IV. Change Process
- A. Instruments
- B. Process

File V. Technology

3. Assessment and Training.

The assessment and training portions of the ESP are interdependent. The training is based in part on results of self-diagnosis by school participants, and their skills in self-diagnosis are transmitted and reinforced by the training. The assessment and training portions of the ESP are delivered to two audiences: (1) teams composed of staff and principals, and (2) school administrators, usually principals, who meet separately with the trainers. The teams usually include three or four teachers at the elementary level and seven or eight at the secondary level, in addition to the building principals. The teams from the participating schools in a district are trained in four one-day workshops (maximum attendance is 50). Workshops are scheduled at least four weeks apart so that some "at-home" activities can take place after each one. One such activity is application of the information presented during the workshop. Another is data collection. Team members observe one another's classrooms, complete instruments tapping their beliefs and perceptions, and observe their own students and record those observations. These assessments enable them to diagnose areas of strength and weakness in their teaching practices and establish an experiential context for the information provided during training.

Between team workshops, the principals meet for four half-day sessions. These meetings focus on instructional leadership and are based on data that principals collect about their own behaviors and personal leadership styles.

Handouts and worksheets distributed at the workshops are collected in a notebook and form a reference manual for participants to take with them when training is completed.

4. Improvement Planning.

The information gathered during assessment and training is used to develop a school improvement plan that addresses both short and long term needs. McREL staff lead the decision-making team through a planning activity designed to develop consensus about needed improvements and the steps that should be taken to accomplish them. Consideration is given not only to establishing priorities among alternative courses of action, but to the group dynamics involved, leadership styles, participant concerns, the needs for short-term impact, and so forth.

The improvement plan, like the diagnostic process, applies the state of the art in planned educational change. The behaviors of teachers in their classrooms, outcomes presently being achieved by students, and current school characteristics are used to produce a performance profile for the school. Discrepancies between the current profile and the school's desired performance are translated into prescriptions for change. The school improvement plan:

- specifies manageable stages of change between present and preferred outcomes and behavior,
- specifies potential obstacles to the implementation of improvement plans, and

- sets down workable strategies to overcome the identified obstacles and attain the preferred outcomes.

A McREL-designed computer software package can be used for these steps if appropriate hardware is available.

The plan includes an evaluation component for providing information on how much growth individuals are achieving, how the school is moving to match the effective school characteristics, and whether the strategies for overcoming obstacles are working.

5. Follow-up

A final phase of the Effective Schools Program provides for follow-up visits by McREL staff to assist the school in successfully implementing the effective schools plan. McREL staff monitor and assess the plan, coach, model skills, and disseminate relevant materials to support the plan.

Evaluation Design

Several features of the ESP pose constraints on assessing program impact. First, like most complex change programs, the ESP has diffuse goals and objectives. The program is intended to bring about positive change in variables it doesn't touch directly, as a cumulative effect of a series of interactions and resources that themselves represent complex training events. Conceptually, the intended impact moves through levels and stages of change as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Tracing Pattern of Desired McREL-ESP Impact

		ESP Participants	Building	Classroom	Students
Level #1	Research ESP Design workshops	changes in knowledge, awareness, perceptions, skills	---	---	---
Level #2		changes ir behavior on-site	---	---	---
Level #3		---	changes in the building culture	---	---
Level #4		---	---	changes in classrooms	---
Level #5		---	---	---	changes in student motivation, engag., success rates, etc.
Level #6		---	---	---	changes in student achievement

The ESP operates in a change environment that is even more complex. At any given time, the program is only one of a myriad of factors influencing the knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors of participants. And, a direct outcome of the program is only one of many factors influencing what may ultimately occur in the classrooms and buildings in question.

Because of this complexity, McREL does not attempt to experimentally isolate the intended effects of the ESP. Rather, McREL recognizes that positive changes and interesting patterns of effect may be "contaminated" and/or diluted by non-ESP occurrences. Additionally, some effects may not be cap-

tured by our assessment instruments. Our solution is to examine the *weight* of available evidence across sites and measures. That is, McREL seeks to show that despite the variability of contexts, certain effects and changes appear most or all of the time where we are able to measure them.

A second constraint on evaluating the ESP is McREL's desire to refrain from placing too great a response burden on participants. Assessment requirements of the program itself, without additional impact assessment, probably approach participants' upper limits of tolerance. They are "paying customers" in most cases, and are not always amenable to providing data not needed for the training. For this reason, our impact assessment relies on the data produced through training rather than on additional data gathered solely for evaluation purposes. Also, we use an unbalanced matrix, pre-experimental sampling design; each of the data sources used is available from only a subsample of sites, selected in part on the basis of their willingness to provide the information we need. Again, McREL relies on weight of evidence, or triangulation, rather than a pure experimental effect, to inform us about what the ESP is accomplishing.

An additional feature of the program reinforces the choice of a non-probability sampling approach; that is, the treatment or intervention is fluid, and in some respects, changeable. Trainers intentionally adapt their efforts to the idiosyncracies of sites and participant groups, rather than treating all sites the same. Within bounds, the trainers differ in the approaches they use, emphasizing those they do best. The program itself is tailored to the needs and goals at each site; essentially, each site receives a custom program. And, the ESP is constantly evolving to accommodate and/or capitalize on new research findings, newly-discovered training approaches, new areas of interest. Thus, the external validity of evaluation results from a sample of sites. Even a "representative" sample of sites is somewhat questionable. We try instead to gather evidence across as many sites as possible, and draw conclusions from the weight of that evidence.

Summary

McREL believes that as the body of research on school and teacher effectiveness merge, we are moving closer to a firm science of school improvement and that this science provides a good framework for designing school development activities. With over 100 individual schools and school districts, including rural isolated, suburban, urban, elementary, junior-middle, and high schools in 14 states, completing The Effective Schools Program, evidence supports the validity of this approach to improve the efficiency, the effectiveness, and most importantly, the relevance of what goes on in schools to achieve high levels of student academic success.

References

Good, T. L. (Ed.). (1983). Research on teaching [Special issue]. *The Elementary School Journal, 83*(4).